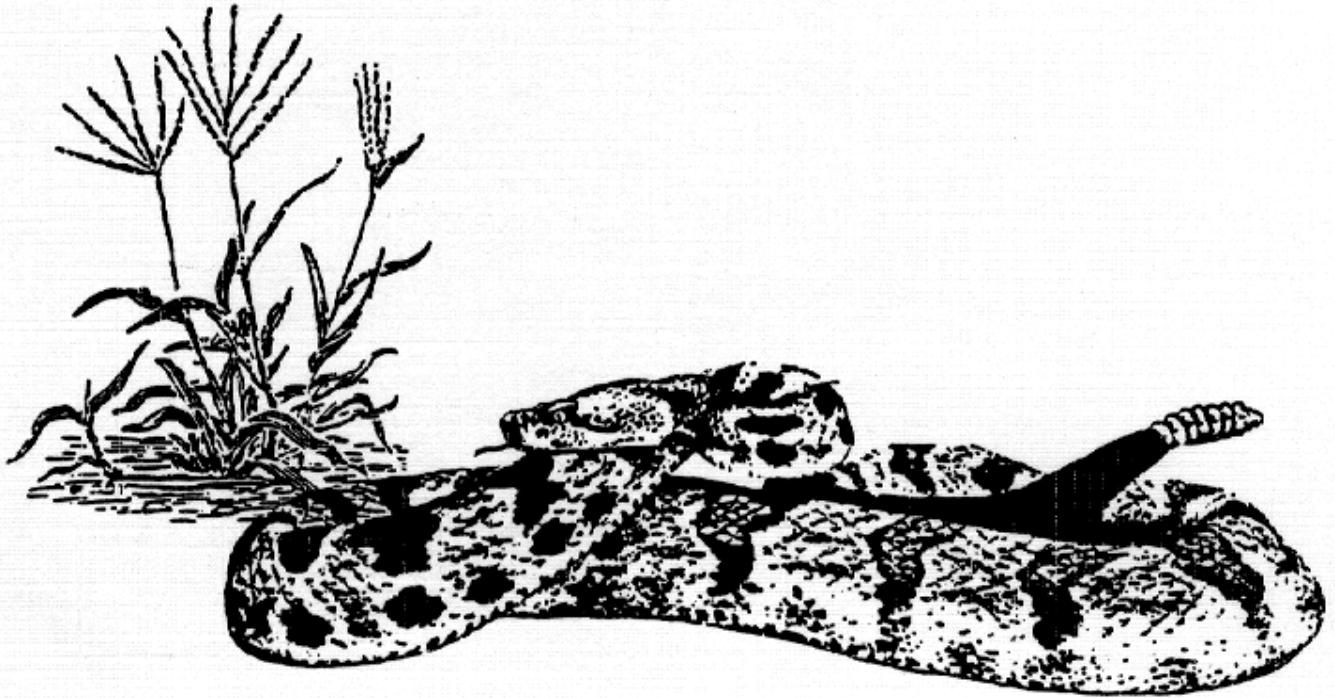


Virginia's Wildlife

Species Profile



Canebrake Rattlesnake

Crotalus horridus atricaudatus

Status: State Endangered

Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries
Wildlife Diversity Division
Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program
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(IV) Verona: 540-248-9360
(V) Fredericksburg: 540-899-4169

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Virginia's Wildlife Species Profile: Canebrake Rattlesnake

Virginia Distribution: Southeastern Coastal Plain

Characteristics

The canebrake rattlesnake is a large venomous snake reaching a maximum length in Virginia of about 5 1/2 feet. As the only rattlesnake found in southeastern Virginia, it is easily identified by its distinctive black tail and rattle. The body color is usually pinkish, gray, yellow, or light brown, with brown to black chevrons. A brown or chestnut mid-dorsal stripe is usually present, as is a yellowish-gold to brown stripe from the eye to the back of the jaw. Canebrakes have a wide head with a deep pit on each side between the eye and nostril, and elliptical pupils.

Feeding

Canebrakes feed primarily on gray squirrels, and typically feed only once or twice each year. They may also capture and eat other rodents, rabbits, and birds.

Habitat and Distribution

The canebrake is a physically distinct variant of the timber rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*) which ranges from New England to Minnesota and south to Florida and Texas. Whether the canebrake warrants status as a subspecies is in question, but populations occurring southward from southern Missouri, western Tennessee, and southeastern Virginia are considered to represent this population.

In Virginia, while timber rattlesnakes are widespread in the mountain regions and western Piedmont, canebrakes occur only as two populations in the southeastern corner of the state. On the Lower Peninsula they occur in Hampton, Newport News, and York County; and south of the James River they are still found in Isle of Wight County, and in the Cities of Suffolk, Chesapeake, and Virginia Beach.

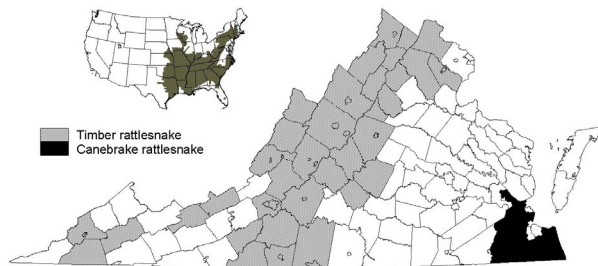


Figure 1. Canebrake and timber rattlesnake distribution in Virginia and the United States.

FACT: There are 30 species of snakes found in Virginia, but the canebrake rattlesnake is the only snake listed by the DGIF as endangered or threatened in the Commonwealth.

Mature hardwood forests are the preferred habitat of canebrake rattlesnakes, but the snakes also are found in mixed hardwood-pine forests, cane thickets, and in the ridges and glades of swamps. They prefer areas with numerous logs and a significant layer of leaves and humus. Canebrakes overwinter in the bases of hollow trees and stumps, and in the underground tunnels resulting from stump and root decomposition.

Reproduction

Canebrakes mature at about 4-6 years of age, and reproduce only every 2-3 years. Mating occurs in mid-summer through fall, and litters of 7-18 young are born the following August or September. The young are about 12 inches in length at birth, and resemble the adults.

Morphology: Snakes

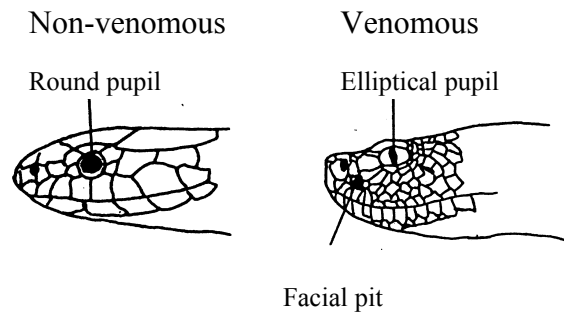


Figure 2. Facial distinctions between venomous and non-venomous snakes of Virginia.

Threats, and How You Can Help

Habitat destruction or modification, and persecution by humans, are the primary threats to canebrake rattlesnakes. Despite their reputation, most canebrakes are reluctant to bite in the wild, preferring to lay undetected among the leaf litter. They rarely rattle even when approached, but if disturbed or startled they may strike in self-defense. Most rattlesnake bites occur when humans attempt to kill, capture, or handle a snake.

If you see a rattlesnake in the wild, do not disturb it. If you are concerned about its presence, please call the local office of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. If a rattlesnake bites you, do not attempt to administer first aid; rather, immediately seek treatment for snakebite at a medical facility.

For additional information, consult *A Guide to Endangered and Threatened Species in Virginia* by K. Terwilliger and J.R. Tate, or *The Reptiles of Virginia* by Joseph C. Mitchell.

Citation: Fernald, RT. 1999. Canebrake rattlesnake: *Crotalis horridus atricaudatus*. Virginia's wildlife species profile No. 030013.1 (Fernald RT, series editor). Richmond: Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.